1: Lorimer T-3 (1920-4; 1934-5) 1938 AV7 Burusho AV7

The Burusho of Hunza

by E. O. LORIMER

THE small state of Hunza is the most northerly in British India. It consists for the most part of a close-packed mass of unscaled and unscalable mountain peaks over 20,000 feet, seamed by untrodden rivers of snow and ice; as might be anticipated, it is mainly uninhabited. Its frontiers march with Afghanistan on the northwest and with Chinese Turkestan on the north and northeast. But where the Hunza river has cut its way down from the Pamirs to join the Gilgit river and ultimately the Indus, there remain, clinging to the mountain sides, a few sloping, rocky terraces which, if water can be brought to them, can with diligence be rendered fit for human habitation. These oases of green amidst the barren desolation of rock and cliff and mountain peak are the habitat of a sturdy mountain people, the Burusho, speaking a difficult but extremely interesting language, of so great antiquity that no affinity between it and any other known form of human speech has yet been traced by the comparative philologist.

When D.L. was posted as Political Agent, Gilgit (1920–24) he made it one of his leisure tasks to collect material for a scientific study of Burushaski (the language of the Burusho) the result of which is a three-volume work*—grammar, texts and vocabulary—of which the last volume is just issuing from the press. In 1934—ten years after his retirement—we returned unofficially to Hunza, armed indeed with a considerable knowledge of the language but with no facility in speaking it, to live amongst the peasants and make such a study of their customs, agriculture, economics, etc., as amateur anthropologists might.

During our four years in Gilgit we had not failed to discover that the Hunzukuts (dwellers in Hunza) were the most attractive of all the likable mountain peoples of the Gilgit Agency, the most physically prepossessing, the most intelligent and the most trustworthy. All classes in Hunza gave us a warm welcome, from the Mir—who has

* *The Burushaski Language*, by Lt.-Col. D. L. R. Lorimer, Oslo, 1935 (England: Williams and Norgate) published by the Norwegian Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture.

1: Lorimer T-3 (1920-4; 1934-5) 1938 AV7 Burusho AV7

[643] ruled his country in the humanest and wisest of benevolent autocracies, since the treaty of 1892 placed him on the throne of his murdered father 181 and parricide brother—to our humbler neighbours in Aliabad, the • 609 village four miles below the capital which we made our headquarters for fifteen months. As soon as the people grasped the purpose of our [212] coming (which was not easy to explain to an illiterate people) they were overjoyed that a ' Sahib ' should trouble to learn their vernacular—a thing which no white man or woman had done before—and take an interest in their customs and hereditary lore. At first they would hesitate : ' but you have wheels (=machines) in England, and can do all these things better than we can '. Within a few days they were vying with each other in explaining, demonstrating and bringing ploughs, looms, winnowing forks, bows, stone cooking pots to the resthouse where we were installed, that D.L. might measure them and take ' studio portraits ' of them, ' for you mustn't put anything in the book about us that isn't exactly true '.

132 The entire life of the Hunzukuts is centred in water. The rain-
312 fall in the oasis level (7–9,000 feet), is negligible—we reckoned less
361 than 2 inches per annum ; in default of any means of raising the water, the river, flowing between its crumbly earthen cliffs, 500 or 1,000 feet below their fields is useless for irrigation ; there are no springs or wells ; hence all water for all purposes must be trapped high up at the snout of some side glacier and conveyed on galleried aqueducts across yawning gorges and the faces of sheer cliffs. The main water channel, the Dala, which supplies all the more recent villages of Hunza, ' the new settlements ' as they are called in contradistinction to the three original villages—Baltit the capital, Altit and Ganesh—travels some 8 or 10 miles in its circuitous route from the Herber glacier in the gorge behind Baltit, cradled between snow-peaks of 23,000 feet, before it peters out in a semicircular sweep round Aliabad.

312 The Dala was dug some three or four generations ago (90–100
412 years) with wooden shovels and wooden picks tipped with ibex horn,
816 and represents an amazing feat of engineering skill for people without any instruments of precision. The sluices that control the distribution of water—every teaspoonful of which is rigorously allotted—are of the simplest ; most often a slab of flattish stone plastered in with mud, sometimes a wooden shutter sliding in a rude wooden frame, sometimes when the water is being taken off to a lower level a circular hole in a stone slab, closed at need with a mushroom-shaped stopper, rough hewn from a solid tree trunk.

SETTLING IN

123 609 771 It was at once clear that there was not going to be any initial hostility or distrust to overcome, even amongst the women. This is rather remarkable when you think that not one of them has ever been more than five or six miles away from her home village, and that they have never seen a white woman at close quarters before. They are a fine, healthy, good-looking crowd, and always appear cheery and good-tempered. Undoubtedly the short-cut to the women's hearts was to make much of their youngsters. In a superstitious place this would be dangerous; they would be terrified of the Evil Eye; but we noted with thankfulness that these entirely non-Oriental people were as free from inhibiting superstitions as we ourselves. This promised to make our work immensely easier.

3: Lorimer L-3 (1920-4; 1934-5) 1935 AV7 Burusho AV7

312
423 And so life seems to go on. Even water rights, the turning of the carefully-husbanded water on to the land of the various groups in succession, appear to be exercised, according to the recognised scheme, by those concerned without recrimination. But at this season water is plentiful.

562
884 Women here hold a position of freedom and respect rare in the East. Young and old they move freely about, unveiled and unaccompanied. They mingle and converse quite naturally and unselfconsciously with men. No doubt everyone knows everyone else and many are related. Young marriageable girls are as free and open-faced as the married women.

609
123 To the stranger within their gates, at any rate to the Sāhib and Mīm sāhiba, strayed out of another world, everyone is courteous and cordial, welcoming approach and questions, anxious to give information, amused at and appreciative of stumbling efforts to speak their difficult language, inviting them to their work parties in their fields or their leisure gatherings in their shady gardens. Always there is perfectly natural, self-respecting courtesy and good feeling, never that servility, false familiarity, self-assertiveness or aggressiveness characteristic of those who suffer from a sense of real or imagined inferiority.

This may appear a roseate, even idyllic picture, and no doubt there must be darker patches on the reverse side of it, but these do not appear to dim the general effect.

184
157 So much for the Hunzukuts Burusho. Of their Nagir neighbours I can say little. In casual contacts I have found them also friendly and courteous. The general impression is that they are not so actively cheerful as the Hunzukuts.

000 We may now turn our attention to the speakers of Werchikwār (Wərčikwar). That language is spoken only in the Wershigūm valley, known as the Yasīn district from the name of the village adjoining the administrative headquarters. The linguistic situation existing in Yasīn is shown in the following table:

682 past 40 years. Never to my knowledge has a stranger
[609] or a visitor ever been harmed or injured.

175 In bygone days the Hunzans were considered good
648 fighting men and were feared by the Chinese, the Afghans and neighboring tribes. It is a fact that they have only been conquered or beaten once in their history and that was by a British force that defeated them at the Battle of Nilt. The British did not seek to conquer the country. It was at the time when the British were the rulers of India. They requested that the Mir of Hunza allow free passage of the mail to Kashgar in China. The Mir at that time, Safdar Ali, felt that he could count upon the aid of the Russians and the Chinese and challenged the British authority. Then the British force went into the field and it required deliberation and courage to assault the high fortress, but it was accomplished by the British and the
[643] Mir fled for his life. The British then appointed his brother as the ruler and departed peacefully. Apart from this, the British did not interfere in the affairs of the Hunzans.

123 *You lose face if you carry anything yourself or do any work.* In all my travels throughout the world, including Hunza, I always did my share of the carrying. I wasn't going to stand by and see one or two men burdened down with my belongings while I walked about empty handed. I will not allow it to be said that I lost face because of this.

I don't want it to be thought that I am better than anyone else nor will I allow them to think that they are better than I. Wherever there was work to be done or burdens to be borne, I always did my share and I intend to keep on doing it.

131 *Hunza in the Himalayas.* Some writers keep referring to Hunza, Gilgit and Rakaposhi as being in the

42 Durand G-3 (1888-93) 1900 AV1 Kashmir
Burushe AV7

CHAPTER V

VISIT TO HUNZA NAGAR

609 At Chalt I dismissed the Nagar men who had come to Gilgit to act as hostages during my absence, and sent them away well pleased. The Nagar people seemed to be really keen on my visiting their country, and the Hunza representative with me explained the rather doubtful tone of his master's letters by the fact that the Thum was suffering severely from fever. In addition to this, which might delay our interviews, the chief feared that the height of the river, which was in full flood, might make our journey difficult and dangerous. In the whole course of the river only two bridges existed, both of them twig rope suspension bridges, one at Chalt, the other exactly opposite Hunza, and there was no other means of crossing the river when in flood. There had been latterly some ill-feeling between the Hunza-Nagar Chiefs, and the upper bridge had not been repaired, neither side caring to take the trouble when it might become necessary to cut the bridge at a moment's notice. However, I heard that the relations were no longer strained, and that the bridge was now being renewed by the Nagar

491
[186]

4: Durand G-3 (1888-93) 1900 AV1 Kashmir
Burusho AV7

people, who had practically the monopoly of the necessary birch. Our crossing into Hunza was therefore assured, and I received civil enough letters from the Thum repeating his invitations. His epistolary style was always quaint and high-flown, and on this occasion, when welcoming me, he compared my party to "camels without nose-ropes uncontrolled," meaning by this that we were free to wander at our pleasure in all directions. In a former letter he had, with reference to the difficulty of supplying our party, compared us to elephants. On a later occasion he incidentally remarked that he proposed to send my head on a charger as a present to the Government of India: but there was a good deal to come before that.

Crossing a mile above Chalt the rope bridge over the Hunza river, which seemed the longest and steepest we had yet crossed, though that over the Gilgit river had a span of three hundred and sixty feet, we found ourselves in Nagar territory, the first Europeans who had ever penetrated its mysterious wilds. The bridge was a new one, fortunately for us, for they are very unsafe when old, and should be renewed annually. This involves a good deal of labour, as nine cables of twisted birch twigs of the necessary length, in this case some four hundred and fifty feet, have to be prepared. The people therefore often put off the work and chance the bridge lasting, and I have seen bridges three and four years old in use. This is horribly dangerous; the birch twigs dry and perish, and the ropes break suddenly. As a rule they do not go all together, and I have seen a bridge in use con-

4: Durand G-3 (1888-93) 1900 AV1 Kashmir
Burusho AV7

133 land of silent mystery. Looking up from our vantage ground above the glacier, it was obvious that the ice rivers had receded, and, judging from the people's traditions at no distant date, leaving gigantic moraines to the south and in the direction of Hispar.

341 The road to this point from Nagar was very pretty, running entirely through cultivation and orchards, and occasionally under the walls of a village fort. The people were evidently very hard working, and the cultivation and labour expended on walling the fields
609 was most thorough. At some villages they used to bring us out presents of fruit, and at all they were civil and pleasant. They are a nice people, and independent. One old man was very indignant at the men with us for passing along the edge of his
651 field where there was no footpath. We came in one place on an amusing instance of the world-wide tendency to scamp Government work. We were crossing a field which I noticed was very badly gleaned, and I asked the reason. I was told it was one of the Thum's, and that, as the villagers had to cultivate and reap it for him, they did not take as much trouble as if it had been their own.

533 A boy came along with us one day, and played on a long pipe with a very sweet note. It was quite a pastoral. The last we saw of him he was wandering below us on a classic lawn, by the side of a stream which ran flecked with sunlight under the shadow of great walnut trees, playing his pipe, whose plaintive notes floated up to us, mingled with the murmur of
301 the water. His dard cap was ornamented with a garland of red and white flowers stuck into its folds.

000 I had to leave Nagar long before I had exhausted